Newsletter

Dunstable & District Local History Society

N° 25 February 2006

The Chairman's Report

2005 saw us return to the Methodist Church Hall for our winter programme. Every change has its pros and cons, but I think moving was the right thing to do. Your committee will continue to try to bring you the best winter and summer programmes we possibly can.

My thanks go to all the people who make our Society the success it undoubtedly is. Our Secretary, Joan Curran, continues to give invaluable and enthusiastic support to everything we do. Gordon Ivinson, our Vice-Chairman, and Ron Driver, have done great service in planning fascinating summer outings and booking speakers for the winter programme. Cynthia Turvey, our Treasurer, keeps the accounts superbly and gives us clear statements of our current financial position. Omer Roucoux edits our Newsletter which is full of intriguing articles and pictures. Ron Frith has found a wonderful sound system which has greatly improved the quality of our meetings. Peter Boatwright keeps us in touch with the Town Centre Management Group and Bernard Stevens is, as ever, a source of wise counsel and a generous host for our Committee meetings. Due to work commitments, Ron Driver is unable to continue as a member of the Society's committee. I would like to thank him for his past work and hope that he will still be able to attend our events. I would also like to thank the people who organise the refreshments, who put out and stack the chairs, and John Buckledee for his excellent writing up of our meetings for the Dunstable Gazette.

Tudor Day, November 19th, was again a great success. In past years it has been organised by Jean Yates and South Bedfordshire District Council. In future, the finances will be in the hands of Dunstable Town Council. I have been told that Tudor Day will happen in future years but that it will be different in some respects. If you value Tudor Day, please make sure you tell the Town Councillors, especially Mike Tilley, who is Chairman of the Library and Promotions Committee.

The Society is grateful to the Town Council for giving us a room in Priory House for the establishment of an archive and research facility. I refer to it as the John Lunn room, as the nucleus of the contents is material which he accumulated over the years. John was always anxious to see it permanently housed and accessible to anyone with an interest in local history. We are busy equipping the room and devising a database so that material for research can be easily accessed. As I said in previous reports, we will need members to steward this room when it is established.

Several of us have had the privilege of visiting people in their homes and recording their memories of wartime Dunstable. I enjoyed it thoroughly and met many interesting people in the process. This was all in aid of a book to commemorate the sixtieth anniversaries of VE Day and VJ Day. I also learnt much history which was unconnected with the stated aims of my visits and made some useful contacts for other projects.

On behalf of Omer Roucoux, I would like to invite you to send items for inclusion in the Newsletter. They do not have to be particularly long and do not need to be the result of extended research. Many of you have memories of Dunstable when life was quite different from the way it is now. These would be of interest to fellow readers but, please, nothing libellous.

It is a great honour to be Chairman of this Society. As I said in the last Newsletter, I am willing to stand for election to this post for one more year, but will not do so subsequently. I would like to thank you for your support and encouragement over the years and hope that you have enjoyed the Society's activities as much as I have.

Hugh Garrod

SUCCESS AND FAILURE OF THE TURNPIKE TRUSTS

Omer Roucoux

In the time of Queen Anne, at the beginning of the 18th century, we had great ships sending goods to America and India, but inside Britain sacks of coal were still dispatched on pack-horses because wheeled traffic would have stuck in the mud or broken in the ruts each time the road crossed a pocket of clay.

The section from Dunstable to Hockliffe was one of the most notorious stretches of English roads. Celia Fiennes who passed there around 1695 calls it *a "sad road, full of slough, in the winter it must be impassable".* Fortunately *" there is a very good pitched causeway for foote-people and horse that is raised up high from the road, and a very steepe chalky hill from whence it has its name Chalk Hill just as you enter Dunstable .. it is a good town ... full of inns ...".*

There are various reasons why the roads had reached such a pitiful state. During many centuries the care of the local roads was in charge of each parish. There was no effective highway authority either local or central. An act passed in 1555 *'Act for Mending of Highwayes'* officially put the parishes in charge of the upkeep of the King's highways. But this act was a dismal failure. The surveyors were unpaid and most often unqualified and unequipped. The workers were generally unwilling and not happy to be removed from their own work. Also the upkeep of the roads was of no interest to the local people; they were used, for the most part, by long distance travellers. Travelling, including long tours on the continent, had become fashionable. Competition for speed between the coaches did not take the safety of the travellers into account and even less the damage done to the road surfaces. The increase in town population also caused more livestock to be driven from the countryside to the town and everything, which could be carried by packhorse — coal, stones and market goods — still did not make use of wheeled vehicles, these were too slow !

The Turnpike Trusts Soon some people realised that something had to be done about the roads. The Act of 1663 shows the beginning of this. The first Turnpike Trusts gave the necessary legal powers to collect tolls from the travellers along some places on the Great North Road and use the money to repair the road. The trend was set and by the end of the 18th century more than 20,000 miles of British roads were under the supervision of Turnpike Trusts.

A trust was instituted for 20 years at a time, people considering that it would be long enough to make the roads good for ever. But it was not so and the trusts asked to be reconvened. Altogether there were thousands of acts legalising new trusts or reconvening old ones. The name 'turnpike' comes from the fact that gates were installed across the road to stop the traffic. The gates worked like turnstiles and were fitted with pikes on top. The Trust usually employed a surveyor to take charge of the surface of the road, he employed workmen and labourers. A toll-keeper was in charge of collecting the tolls, opening and closing the gates and living in a house specially built for him. All the workers involved were paid wages from the tolls collected and if there was any money over, the Trust kept it for themselves.

The existence of these Trusts was not enough to make the roads good, many reasons can explain their unpopularity amongst the travellers and the local inhabitants. Firstly the bad financial management of the Trusts meant that they were practically all in debt. There was no way of checking the number of vehicles passing through the gate, so some dishonest gate keepers kept the profit for themselves, others accepted bribes to allow traffic to pass without paying their due. The leasing of the tolls was not a solution either: the Trusts were spared the trouble of collecting, but, since the point for the man responsible was to maximise his profits, they had inevitably to let the concession at a fraction of its real value. In fact only a small amount of the money collected for the upkeep of the road was used for that purpose.

Secondly the trusts were very often unpopular with the local people. In some districts the efforts to make good roads were even resisted by the inhabitants for the most unexpected reasons. In Sussex for instance, in 1710 the farmers petitioned against reconstruction on the ground that *"the roads are better for cattle to go on as they now are, than amended, because the stones will cripple and lame them before they come to market."*

But the most serious reason of the trusts' inefficiency was that the techniques were inadequate. The roads were looked after but the traffic was so great that they were deteriorating as fast as they were repaired. A paper read to the Royal Society in 1737 by Robert Phillips hit the mark in stating that the roads were made *"bad by art"*, he goes on to say that the users *"find the Roads grow daily worse. The Waggoners say, that whereas they had been told that, by paying a little money for a few years they should have the Roads so good as to be able to carry greater Loads, and use fewer Horses, they find out that now the Roads are so much worse that they are obliged to add an Horse or two instead of taking any off, and still pay the same Money ; yet do not know when this Expense will end."*. He even went on to add, certainly with some exaggeration , " *if the turnpikes were taken down and the roads not touched for seven years they would be a great deal better than they are now."*

New road building techniques Appropriate techniques were urgently needed ; there were many good ideas all through the 18th century about improving the foundations and the drainage to obtain a stable and durable road surface, but none of these were applied throughout the country or where the roads were at their worst. In 1772 an important Act prescribed that the wheels of the vehicles should be made so as to repair rather than wear out the roads on which they travelled. The wheels should be converted into rollers by which the roads would be levelled and consolidated. This prevented to some extent a too rapid deterioration of the road surface but the essential progress still had to be achieved when influential engineers were put in charge of the work.

Thomas Telford, the son of a shepherd, was born in Eskdale (Scotland) in 1757. The importance of his work as a road engineer was the fact that he brought sound principles of engineering to bear on the problems of road construction. In place of the haphazard and largely hit and miss methods in use, he insisted on careful drainage, both beneath the road surface itself and in the adjoining terrain, to prevent possible landslides that would disrupt the foundation and surface. He also required the most careful grading of stones for the foundation and the surface, using uniformly sized large stones for the basis - 7 by 4 in. with stone chips wedged between them - and irregular but small stones for the top, to a depth of 6 inches and then above it a layer of small stones or gravel. Whereas earlier builders had attempted to bind the foundation and surface with clay or chalk, with dreadful results, Telford only used stones that were carefully washed and sieved. The surface of the pavement was moderately cambered to throw off the water without tilting the vehicles at an exaggerated angle. As the iron shoes of the horses and the iron tyres of the wagons ground down the sharp corners of the small stones of the upper layer, and the dust worked into the structure of the road, it was hardened and bound into a smooth and virtually watertight covering. One of the most important contributions of Telford's life was his magnificent highway from London to North Wales, which is followed roughly by the present A5.

The General Turnpike Road Act of 1822 modified some decisions of previous Acts, attempting to cancel those which were ineffectual and introduce better ones, and essentially tried to replace a great multitude of facts by a general one. It established the tolls due for diverse categories of vehicles, according to their weights, the number of wheels and their width, the number of horses pulling them, and it prohibited the protruding nails on the wheels. It listed the exemptions of tolls to some merchandise such as manure and hay or fodder for the cattle. If only one tree, or one log of timber or one stone was transported it was exempted. It prescribed the installation of weighing scales, mile-stones and sign-posts and much more.

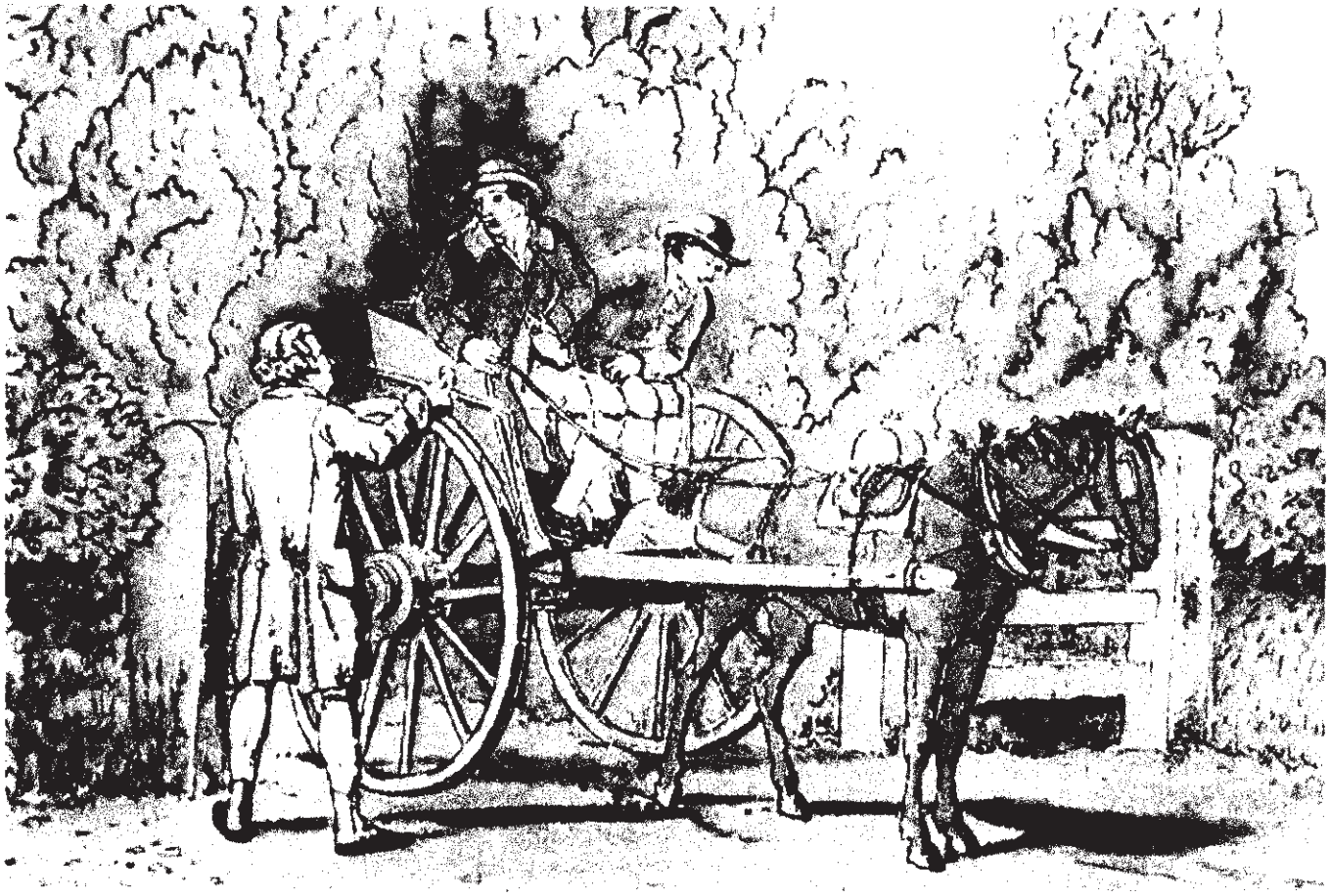
John Macadam was the other famous road builder of the 19th century. At the age of 60 he became the highway inspector for Bristol and its environs. He was consulted by Turnpike Trusts throughout Britain and before his death in 1836, his name had become a household name for the type of road surface he used.

Although his work was mainly to repair existing roads he introduced a few modifications to Telford's methods. For the new roads he took great care for the drainage of the road subsoil because that was enough to insure road stability. He dispensed almost entirely with the elaborate foundations laid by Telford. So his road building came much cheaper. The main change was to add a water-bound dust surface. This was very effective at first; the heavy, slow-moving, horse-drawn vehicles had pulverised the road surface effectively to provide the dust, which might be reinforced with lime to produce the binding medium. The defects of this surface became evident with modern vehicles of the 20th century. The fast moving rubber tyres tended to loosen rather than compact the stone surface while, as traffic speeds went up, the dust problem, always present to some degree on a water-bound McAdam road, became enormous. For this reason bituminous tar came to be used as the binding medium in this century, although the McAdam principle remained basically unchanged.

In the opening years of the 19th century it might have seemed that a new age of road travel had opened. Quite apart from the work of Telford and McAdam, the inauguration of the mail-coach service by the Post Office in 1784 geared the whole system of passenger transport to a new idea of speed on the road and, above all, of punctuality.

Until this year the royal mail had been carried by post-boys on horse-back ; the service was slow - the journey from Bath to London took the best part of 2 days - and dangerous. The riders were often held up by highwaymen and they might well be killed. When the stage-coach service opened the same journey took 17 hours. There was strong competition with the Post Office which very soon started using the stage-coaches for the mail. By 1800 mail-coach services were installed on all the roads travelled by the royal mail.

The end of the Turnpike Trusts. Around 1850, the roads, so busy at the beginning of the century were deserted. Things could have been very different. An automotive steam engine was developed by Guerney. His steam carriage, in 1827, ran along the Bath road at a speed of 10 mph. In the following years these vehicles started competing with the horse-drawn carriages. By 1831 there was a regular service of steam-coaches between Gloucester and Cheltenham and in 1833, between London and Brighton. But now the jealousy of many interested parties began to make itself felt. The turnpike



trustees made steam-coaches pay tolls 20 times as heavy as those on horse coaches. The railways, after fighting the competition of the canals started fighting that of the steam on the roads. Under all these influences Parliament passed in 1861 an *'outstanding act of idiocy'*. It limited the speed on the roads to 10 mph in the country and 5 mph in the towns. In 1864 came the notorious *Man and Flag Act*, which not only reduced these limits to 4 mph, and 2 mph in the towns, but required also the presence of a man with a red flag to walk in front of every mechanically driven vehicle on the road. By that time the effective speed of the steam-coach was able to reach an average of some 34 mph. In 1873 a Select Committee recommended the abrogation of this ludicrous legislation but this was nevertheless confirmed again in 1878. This meant that all the progress made in the country to improve mechanical transport was wasted and allowed other nations to have a headstart of at least a quarter of a century. The first practical motor car was produced in Germany by Daimler in 1887. The *'Man and Flag Act'* remained in force until 1896.

Towards the end of the coaching era the revenue the Turnpike Trusts drew from tolls was very large. Between London and Manchester, for instance, each stage coach used to pay in tolls £1,700 a year ; and along several of the principal routes more than a hundred stage coaches and mail would pass every day. The coming of the railway cut off the greatest part of this large income at one blow. Almost as soon as a new railway opened, it was usual for the turnpike trust to go bankrupt. The only traffic they were now able to tax was local, which did not justify the use of the railway. There were riots, violence, destruction of the gates, first in Wales and in then in the rest of the country. In 1864 a Parliamentary Committee was appointed which condemned the system reporting that the whole was *"unequal in pressure, costly in collection, inconvenient to the public, and injurious as causing a serious impediment to intercourse and traffic"* By 1881, the 1,100 turnpike trusts were reduced to 184, in 1890 to 2, and finally abolished in 1895.

So, was the Turnpike Trust a success or a failure ? A bit of both, probably, but let us finish on a positive note. Lord Congleton wrote, around 1835 *"If the roads had been vested in the hand of government, it may safely be said that this plan would have failed, for government would never have been able to vote upwards of a million and a half a year for those roads only which now are turnpike roads. It is, therefore, to the turnpike system of management that England is indebted for her superiority over other countries with respect to roads"*.

The Bottled Curse or *Sally the Dunstable Witch*

In the *Newsletter* n°19, p.124 -5, I wrote an article about *Sally the Dunstable Witch* which is now included in the library web site. Sally seems to have cast her spell over everyone and since being included in the town's ghost walks there have been many inquiries about the poem.

Based on my research, Amy Griffin of the Heritage Centre gave a presentation to Dunstable Town Council who were unanimous that the poem should be reprinted and if possible in time for the opening of Priory House. Tony Woodhouse agreed to draw a picture and the printer kept the front cover and poem as faithful as possible to the original booklet. After 130 years (1875 – 2005) *Sally* has appeared again in Dunstable only this time to a more welcome reception. The booklet is available at the Priory House shop, price £2.00.

Rita Swift

RICHARD INWARDS

Hugh Garrod

Richard Inwards was born in Houghton Regis on 22nd April 1840. He came from an educated family, showing early interest in both arts and sciences. Aged 16, he received tuition from John Ruskin. It was from Ruskin that Richard acquired his lifelong interest in studying the weather.

His first job was in an insurance office. He did not enjoy this work and undertook an apprenticeship so that he could become a mining engineer. When 26, he was sent to manage cobalt mines at San Baldomero, near Lake Titicaca in Bolivia. Later appointments took him to Spain, Austria, Mexico, Portugal and Norway.

While in Bolivia, Richard developed an interest in history and archaeology, studying the ruins around him. Subsequently he wrote 'The Temples of the Andes' which was published in 1884. It contained accounts of the history and traditions of South America. He compiled a dictionary of the languages used by the Bolivian people and presented it to the British Museum. In 1936, when he was 96, he told a newspaper reporter, 'If only Europeans could live as peaceably together as these Indians, Europe today would be a much better place than it is.'

Inwards' friends included some of the leading British engineers and scientists of the Victorian and Edwardian eras. He was highly rated by them as a mechanic and technician. At his London home he had a workshop which was furnished with the latest lathes and other equipment. He spent much time there, well into his old age. In it he made his own furniture, many beautiful scale models, equipment for his astronomic and microscopic studies and a grandfather clock which kept remarkably good time.

He invented a hospital bed which could be 'made' without disturbing the patient, a pantograph for producing enlargements of portraits and a pendulum which would maintain a constant length in any country around the world, no matter how hot or cold the climate. Inwards was also an accomplished artist with pencil, brush or chisel. He published three books, the last being in 1911. It was a biography of his friend William F Stanley, who was founder of the Company of Engineering Opticians.

From his earliest days he had collected sayings about the weather, in whichever part of the world he happened to be working. This led to his first book, 'Weather Lore' published in 1869. A second edition was published in 1893 and the book had increased from 91 pages to 245. He received letters from around the world on the subject of weather lore but did not himself produce a third edition.

Inwards was very interested in many branches of science, especially astronomy, meteorology and microscopy. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society in 1861 and joined the Meteorological Society a year later. He was a member of both bodies over three-quarters of a century. Inwards served on many of their committees and was editor of their journals. Towards the end of his life, both Societies would send him telegrams on his birthday. In 1936 it was suggested that the telegrams were made a 'standing order' on each Society's agenda.

Inwards became totally blind in 1933 and was therefore house-bound. All his friends came to see him and he told them how his friend Ruskin had warned him, years before, not to strain his eyesight with too much microscopic work. He continued to take a keen interest in scientific advances until the summer of 1937, when his powers began to fail him. In early autumn, he sank into a coma from which he did not recover. He died on 30th September 1937, aged just over 97 years 5 months.

In his will, he left the copyright of 'Weather Lore' to the Royal Meteorological Society, together with funds to produce a new edition. This was done in the Society's centenary year, 1950.

Richard Inwards never married. He was a life-long teetotaler. His chief recreation was chess, a game which he enjoyed and at which he was very accomplished. He played well into his 90s and was able to defeat people 30 or 40 years his junior.

This article is compiled from the introduction to the 1950 edition of 'Weather Lore' and was supplied to me by Eric Barber, to whom I am very grateful. The last reprint was in 2000 and is available at £9.50

Further Information

In the 1851 Census, the Inwards family is living at 45 Old Road, Linslade, Buckinghamshire. It consists of Elizabeth, widow and mother aged 33; James, 12; Emma, 9; Sarah, 7 and Francis 5. The oldest three children are called scholars. All the family are born in Houghton Regis. Also present, is a servant, Elizabeth Smith aged 19. Richard is not in the 1861 or 1871 Census returns, suggesting that he was overseas at these times. In the 1881 Census, Richard and his sister Sarah are living with their mother at 20 Bartholomew Villas in the St Pancras area of London. Richard is referred to as a mining engineer.

Ten years later, Richard and his mother are still living at the same address. He is referred to as a retired mining engineer. In 1901, Richard is living in the same address, with a servant.

The entry in the 1937 register of deaths suggests that he was still resident at 20 Bartholomew Villas.

The Secret Czechoslovak Military Intelligence Radio Station. At Hockliffe, 1942 - 1945

THE story of the secret radio station operated by Czech freedom fighters near Dunstable during the war was told by Neil Rees to society members.

The talk attracted a large audience to the monthly meeting at the Methodist Church in Dunstable — the hall was so packed that extra seating had to be arranged.

Mr Rees, a Buckinghamshire man who spent some time teaching English in the Czech Republic, became fascinated by the story when he learned that the president of Czechoslovakia had lived in exile in Aston Abbots near Aylesbury after the German invasion of his country.

The area became the centre of Czech resistance activity, including the successful plot to kill the notorious SS ruler of occupied Czechoslovakia, Reinhard Heydrich, whose assassination provoked ruthless Nazi reprisals.

Mr Rees learned that the Czech radio messages to and from their homeland were made from a wireless station near Hockliffe but the location remained a mystery until he was able to contact a local man who had worked at the site.

Nothing now remains above ground of the station, on land off the Watling Street between Hocklife and Dunstable, where once around 20 people worked in the utmost secrecy.

President Benes with British and Czechoslovak army officers at Aston Abbots, Bucks.

In fact the present farmer there had been puzzled by the existence of remnants of old cabling and areas of concrete which could not be ploughed.

The station operated from 1942 until 1946 and Mr Rees has traced aerial photographs of the area which show its huts and wireless masts.

The men who were based there enjoyed a drink at the Saracen's Head in Dunstable and dances at the old town hall, but steadfastly refused to talk about their work.

Their fears about reprisals to their relatives continued long after Germany's defeat, when their country was under Russian Communist control.

One man who settled down in Dunstable died only a few months ago without his story ever being told.

Mr Rees has written a book about the Czech government in exile which is on sale at the Book Castle in Dunstable.

John Buckledee Dunstable Gazette
19 October 2005

ORANGE ROLLING

By Rita SWIFT

Orange Rolling down Pascombe Pit on Good Friday seems to be a custom unique to Dunstable. In the north-east of England it was called Pace-egging or Pace egg rolling, pace being a dialect form of the word Pasque, meaning Easter. Could Pascombe really be Pasque Combe?

Other districts choose to roll eggs down grassy slopes, eggs being a symbol of the stone rolled away from the tomb where Jesus was laid. Could it be that Pascombe Pit is so vast, eggs would not be seen easily and become lost in the undergrowth. However the origin remains a mystery. Over the years the celebration has experienced every type of weather sun, snow, wind, fog and rain but rarely did it stop the fun. Up until and including 1902 this popular event was referred to by the more accurate term of *pelting* oranges, one being either a pelter or a pelted, then the term *throwing* was occasionally used followed by *trundling* and finally *orange rolling* became the more accepted term.

The Dunstable Excelsior Band, Borough Prize Band, the Salvation Army Band, a Punch and Judy Show and various stalls provided regular entertainment. But the vendors cry of "*Three a penny! All lovely and luscious like wine*!" could be heard loud and clear, although if hit by a rotten, juicy missile wine was not the word which first came to mind. In 1899 *Lady Teasers* were on sale together with the oranges and appear to be a rubber item filled with water, an early form of water pistol. The vendors considered Good Friday the best day of the year, as customers were willing to buy fruit no matter what the size or condition.

Youngsters made up the majority of the crowd, from the town and surrounding villages, and did not care about being hit or bruised or tumbling down as long as they returned home with their juicy prizes. But also amongst the orange hunters were always several "old hands," whose object was to turn their fruity shower into hard cash as soon as possible. Various methods were adopted to make themselves conspicuous targets for those above including turning their coats inside out, wearing enormously tall and antiquated top hats, jumping up and down, waving their arms and shouting and so on. A continuous volley of oranges aimed in their direction was deftly bagged and handed to a younger assistant, and hawked around the neighbourhood the following week. Many eager youngsters quickly learned to position themselves behind these 'old stagers' and reaped a greater part of the harvest aimed at them. Towards the end of the afternoon a few *catchers* bore the oranges back to the top of the Pit in their jackets and turned a profit by underselling the bona-fide vendors.

But everyone took it all in good part and unselfishness was characteristic at this event. One example was an occasion when a tiny girl, too young really to safely take part, was struck by an orange with such force that she was knocked over and the orange rolled away. A young boy not much older himself, raced to retrieve it and returned it to the little mite. The reporter watching the young hero was pleased to note that by the end of the afternoon all his pockets were crammed to bursting. A just reward.

Occasionally some toff, with a conspicuously glossy "tile" (top hat), would venture among the throng of merry-makers and within a couple of minutes some well-aimed rotten oranges would have ruined its glory forever. Caps or a hard felt bowler were the regulation headgear for males, as this was the one afternoon when anything within the law was allowed. No self-respecting "bobby" would ever dream of interfering should anyone complain of being hit, or they would have had the crowd to deal with. Good manners prevailed and ladies' hats were not targeted.

At the foot of the Downs there were various stalls, swing-boats and coconut-shies and a muscular woman laboriously grinding out on a powerful organ, the comforting assurance that "*Everybody's loved by someone*!" A regular visitor to this event was a blind pedlar who could be seen making his way with marvellously unerring footsteps perilously near the edge of the Pit.

In 1900 the wind was so fierce the vendors had to pitch their stalls lower down in a more sheltered place but that detracted from the fun. The Dunstable Gazette reported:-

> "*A few courageous young people endeavoured to climb the Downs. Many of them belonged to the fair sex, and, as the wearing of bloomers has by no means yet become general, the wind played havoc with their skirts, and the result may be much more decorously imagined than described. No staid and sober journalist such as the writer of this article would ever dream of looking in that direction while the wind played such mad pranks with these ladyes faire; nevertheless it may easily be imagined that a wonderfully pretty display of multi-coloured petticoats was seen, while here and there a gleam of white, while the fair ones were executing most marvellous evolutions in frantic - but generally futile – endeavours to retain a serene and stately comportment.*"

> "*One musician who was brave enough to go serenely on, unmindful of wind, hail, rain or snow, was the man who ground out a sorrowful dirge on a hand-organ, while his pony meantime worked the merry-go-round. That organ was a revelation! With a perversity and ardour that no fury of the elements could quench, it continued an endeavour to grind out two tunes at once; thus despite that fact that several pipes refused to fulfil their mission, and that others were two, three, or four tones flat, the old organ gave forth a mixed up medley of "Skylark" and "Dolly Gray" which was really astounding. Around the organ-grinder there was gathered a group of some two-score youths, who jeered him incessantly on the result of his hard work; at first I led to pity*

anyone condemned to such soul-distracting labour, but as I noted the calm indifference with which he treated the storm, discord and scoffs of the crowd I came away awed, rather, by such Spartan heroism."

By the beginning of the 20th century behaviour had started to change and several young ladies were struck with oranges mischievously thrown with great force into the crowd at the top of the Pascombe Pit, and some coconuts were even thrown down the Pit. The small number of police, inspite of such a large gathering, was usually successful in preventing any serious outbreaks of rowdyism. Unfortunately there were a few instances, including a coconut-shy, which was pelted and the stand raided by some boys. The Dunstable Excelsior Band fell victim and their programme came to a premature conclusion.

1914 was a quieter Good Friday as the Conservators had passed a resolution prohibiting vehicles to be placed on the Downs including the roundabouts; swings, shooting galleries and other amusements, which were normally to be found, near the Volunteer Inn. Although ice cream, mineral water and orange stalls were well patronised.

In 1940 a large proportion of the children were evacuees whose Cockney voices joined in *"Roll 'em down"* together with *"Roll out the barrel."* The vendors' vans were piled high with cases of fruit and all day the youngsters, scrambled, tumbled and piled up in heaps of struggling arms and legs to gain the golden prize.

1941 - WAR SUSPENDS GOOD FRIDAY CUSTOM

This was the headline that ended Dunstable's Good Friday tradition. The number of oranges rolling down was infinitesimal as they were now an almost unheard of luxury. For the first time since the orange became a popular fruit in England, a link with the ancient custom was broken.

Although the Dunstable Chamber of Trade resurrected the tradition later, it came to an eventual end in **1968** due to Health and Safety regulation and the local traders deciding not to support it any longer.

Many local Dunstablians have happy memories of those days, which together with photographs, would be gratefully received by the writer. This is only a small section of information from the Dunstable Gazette that will eventually go in the archives to be held by the Dunstable & District History Society at Priory House.

A little bit more general information.

From : Quentin Cooper & Paul Sullivan, *Maypoles, Martyrs & Mayhem* Bloomsbury (1994)

Handball and skittles were once popular games today, and at Manchester Grammar School pupils went in for an Olde-England style archery contest. But there was only one real sport on Easter Monday — **egg-rolling.** It was a national pastime in Scotland, where the day was known as Egg Monday. Christian rationalisation said that it represented the rolling away of the stone from the tomb where Jesus had been prematurely buried. The chief object of egg-rolling was to see whose egg could go furthest without disintegrating, though sometimes there were goals marked at the bottom of the hills. The eggs were usually hard-boiled; but often they were not — it is surprising how far an unboiled egg can roll before splattering into a rock.

The defeated eggs were eaten, and their shells crushed to prevent witches from joy-riding in them. Unless you go to work on an egg-shell, a witch can sail out to sea in the unlikely vessel and conjure up storms to drown sailors, who were so perturbed at the prospect that they would not utter the taboo word 'egg' at sea. There is in old saying, *'Break an egg, save* a *sailor'*. This all stems from the idea that any food you leave can be used to work malign magic against you (as can nail-clippings, hairs, bits of clothing, and other personal detritus).

Egg-rolling remains a nationwide Easter tradition. The most hard-boiled roll-players head for Fountains Abbey in North Yorkshire today — where rolling was revived in 1958 — or Avenham Park at Preston in Lancashire, which each year attracts in the region of 40,000 people and almost as many eggs. Among the many brightly coloured eggs rolling down the valley slope are some which are noticeably more orange and spherical than the others. They in are, indeed, oranges — an innovation thrown in to moisten the palate when it comes to eating the shattered contestants; although no orange is allowed to win the egg-rolling. The game never seems to have been particularly competitive at any of its locations, just a gentle bit of fun.

SIR ROGER MORTIMER
THE GREATEST TRAITOR?

The family of Mortimer were famous and powerful barons in mediaeval times. Their strongholds were in the Welsh Marches, which they held with valour and loyalty for the Crown. Several of them were baptised Roger. This Roger Mortimer was born on 25th April 1287 at Wigmore which is now in Herefordshire. He was a friend and ardent admirer of Edward I. His titles in adult life included King's Lieutenant in Ireland, Justiciar of Ireland, Justiciar of Wales and Earl of March. Later he fought at Bannockburn under Edward II. The latter fell under the influence first of Piers Gaveston and then of Hugh Despenser. Mortimer and other barons suffered great injustice during this period and Roger found himself compelled to rebel against the king and his advisers.

Edward II (1307 - 1327)

As a result, he was imprisoned in the Tower of London. On August 1st 1323, he drugged his guards, escaped from the Tower and fled to France. There he was joined by Isabella, Edward II's Queen. They became lovers and plotted to overthrow the regime. They landed with a small army in Suffolk on September 24th 1326 and set off for London.

As the king was very unpopular at this time the rebels gathered support as they went. By the time they reached Dunstable on October 9th, Roger and Isabella had been joined by Henry of Lancaster, the King's uncle. From this time on, the invasion was too powerful to be beaten except by all the royal supporters coming together in one army. Due to long standing rivalries, this was very unlikely to happen. All the Archbishops and Bishops supported Isabella. At this time, the King had retreated to Gloucester. Edward II set a price on Roger's head of £1000.

Edward II was reported as having been murdered at Berkeley Castle, which is in Gloucestershire, on 21st September 1327. The evidence, such as it is, points to Roger being deeply involved in the plot. Roger's relationship with the new King was fraught with difficulties. Superficially he was given every respect but he was secretly reviled for being the Dowager Queen's lover and for taking to himself the role of Protector of the young Edward III.

Sir Roger Mortimer is known to have paid one more visit to Dunstable, in October 1329. Edward III held a tournament in the town and Roger and Isabella were both present. As the king grew in self-confidence, he resented Roger and his influence. Mortimer was kidnapped in Nottingham Castle on 16th September 1330 and taken to the Tower of London. He was tried at Westminster on 26th November and was found guilty by his peers of all 14 charges. Three days later, he was hanged at Tyburn.

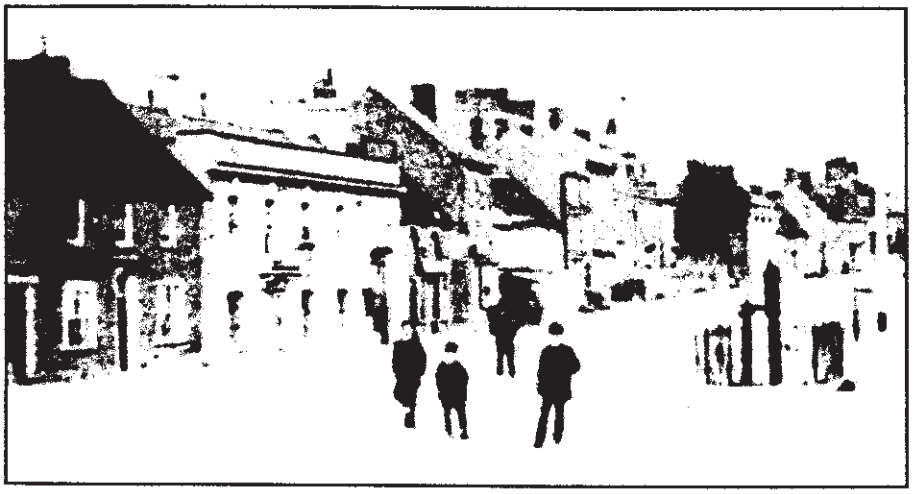
If you want to find out more about Sir Roger Mortimer and read an interesting idea about the fate of Edward II, I recommend 'The Great Traitor' by Ian Mortimer, published by Pimlico.

Hugh Garrod.

Deposition of Edward II, in 1326

THE 'SARACEN'S HEAD' High Street South, Dunstable

David Lindsey



From a photo taken c. 1880

Opposite the "Saracen's Head" is the public water pump which was removed around 1880.

An article appeared in the Business Section of the 'Dunstable Gazette' on the 9th February 2005 giving the news that the Saracen's Head public house was to be put on the market.

After describing the building, it went on to say that *"The Saracen's Head will undoubtedly be of interest to restaurant, bistro and public house operators, and has huge potential to create a unique establishment in the town centre"*

So far so good since there was more chance of the old inn remaining an inn, of some sort, but it then went on *"Alternatively, the premises may offer potential for conversion to other uses including residential development, subject to all necessary consents being obtained."* This latter statement aroused concern since it could attract a developer who might wish to do away with one of the town's old hostelries despite the caveat of the need to obtain appropriate planning permission.

It was generally believed that the building was listed, but enquiries revealed that it was not. It is however in the Conservation Area which meant that the exterior facade might be relatively safe, but anything could be done to the interior.

The District Council's planning department was approached to see if there was any possibility of having it listed even at this late stage. The Conservation Officer who was seen was doubtful whether the building merited listing but offered to consult English Heritage on receipt of a letter from the Society setting out our reasons for our request. This letter was sent at the end of February 2005.

English Heritage responded in July saying the the Secretary of State, after consulting English Heritage, had decided not to list the Saracen's Head. The summarised reasons for this decision were:
"This is an impressive looking building that has attracted local interest, notably from the local history society which provided useful information. Unfortunately, the fact that the building was created out of three cottages, has been much altered, and that the interior contains nothing of national significance, means that it does not fulfil the necessary criteria for listing."

Although disappointing, it was not entirely unexpected and confirmed the Conservation Officer's initial thoughts. The full report of the English Heritage 'agent' who inspected the building contains some interesting information of which an extract is reproduced on the next page for those who are interested in the history of this old inn.

However the story has ended happily. On the 1st December 2005, the Saracen's Head was reopened as an inn serving meals by the new owners, the Independent Pub Company. They have completely revamped the interior and refurbished the facade, both to a high standard. So the building remains what it has been for years - an inn.

Eyebrows were again raised when, on the 4th December 2005, a planning application was publicised in the Dunstable Gazette' seeking permission to *"redevelop the site of the previously demolished buildings to provide eight cottages and reinstatement of previous gardens for public use and demolition of existing buildings"*. The site is at the rear of the Saracen's Head with access from Wood Street. This development should not seriously affect the inn itself and should nor present problems as the rear is still in the Conservation Area. The Manshead Archaeological Society excavated immediately behind the site in 1983/84 and discovered four cellars thought to be parts of the Priory's cellarium, bakehouse and brewhouse. They are aware of the proposal and are keeping an eye on the site.

Much of the information sent by the Society was based on research by Joan Curran and her article on the Saracen's Head published on page 141 of the Society's 'Newsletter', No 21 February 2004.

English Heritage (Listing) :
(Extract of the) **Adviser's report**
The Saracen's Head

CONTEXT

This building is currently for sale or lease. It is within a Conservation Area. The adjoining building, no.47, is listed. The scheduled remains of the Augustinian Priory are located nearby and significant archaeological remains were uncovered behind the inn in the 1980s. These will be considered separately as part of a review of the scheduled monument.

DESCRIPTION

The main façade of the Saracen's Head is five bays in length, including a carriageway, and two storeys high with a shallow parapet. Its stuccoed, black and white painted elevation, with prominent window surrounds, presents a distinctive frontage to the High Street. This masks a brick building forming a range parallel to High Street, which has two rear projecting blocks, and a cross wing at the south end.

HISTORY

It had been generally thought that the present Saracen's Head dated from the 14th century but recent re-examination of the deeds by the Dunstable and District Local History Society indicated that it was in fact created out of three cottages referred to in mid 18th century documents. There had been a much earlier Saracen's Head further up the High Street but this had ceased to be an inn in about 1785. The name was probably transferred to the present Saracen's Head at about this time when it was referred to as such in the Manor Court Records of c.1785. A fire in c.1815 is thought to have damaged stables at the rear of the property and may have resulted in some rebuilding.

The High Street range is much altered and while it may retain earlier elements, it largely dates from the mid or late 19th century, with 20th century additions. The south cross wing and facade date from the mid to late 19th century and it would appear from a photograph of c.1880 that the groundfloor window openings of the facade have subsequently been shortened, possibly as a consequence of a raising of the High Street carriageway.

The interior on the ground-floor level has been opened up and extended and retains no features of merit. Victorian fireplaces and skirting survive in some rooms on the first floor, but these features are not of note.

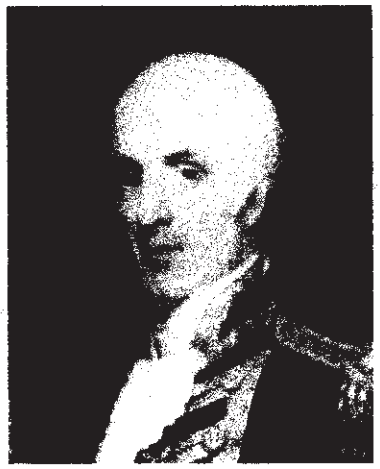
ASSESSMENT

Inspection has shown that given the degree of alteration to this building, it does not have enough national, special historic or architectural interest to be a candidate for listing, since the criteria for C18 and C19 building are selective both in quality and intactness.

A DUNSTABLE CONNECTION WITH NELSON

In the last few months there have been many TV programmes, exhibitions and articles about our national hero. Amid all the facts to be discovered about him there is one slender, but interesting, connection with Dunstable, too insignificant to be mentioned by the media, but for those of us who live here it has some local interest.

Among the members of the Marshe family, who endowed so many charities in the town, was Marshe Dickinson, an 18th century attorney whose grandmother was cousin to Blandina Marshe and Jane Cart. He married well, became Lord Mayor of London and MP for Brackley, Northamptonshire, and built himself a fine house (demolished c.1935) in Dunstable. He had one son and one daughter, Mary, who married Robert Ball, a member of a wealthy Gloucestershire family, and it was their son who was to become Rear-Admiral Sir Alexander John Ball.



Sir Alexander Ball
Detail of an oil painting by H.W.Pickersgill in the National Maritime Museum

It is said that when he and Nelson first met, Nelson had a very low opinion of Ball, but later they became great friends and Ball was one of Nelson's 'band of brothers' in the Mediterranean Campaign of 1798-9. In this campaign he commanded the 'Alexander' and had a distinguished career, in the course of which he saved the Vanguard from almost certain destruction.

After the surrender of Malta to the British in 1800 he left the Navy and became the first Governor of the island, an office he held to the end of his life. He died in 1809, aged 52, greatly honoured and loved in Malta, where there is still a memorial to him. His grandparents, Marshe Dickinson and his wife Mary, are both buried in the Priory Church.

J.C.